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Immigration and Cultural Exchanges in Taiwan–The Exhibition of “A Taste of Hometown: Southeast Asian Flavors”

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Abstract

Southeast Asia (SEA) is the home of 174,000 immigrants in Taiwan, and where 360,000 second-generation immigrant children go to visit their mother-side grandparents. There are around 700,000 industrial migrant workers and social welfare nurses. In total, Taiwan has approximately 1,200,000 immigrants and migrant workers, forming countless ties with SEA region. The trend of migration from Southeast Asia started since the 1980s because of marriage or labor/working contracts, and they bring in more than population, languages, and cultures. Furthermore, their memories of the taste of hometown are as well continuously brought in with the increasing amount of SEA (im)migrants. In the exhibition, we focus on the interactions and challenges between the SEA food plants that profoundly affect Taiwanese culture and nature. Most of the Southeast Asian cuisines require a large number of herbs, food plants, and spices only produced in SEA region and are now widely planted in Taiwan. Despite the legal concerns, there are increasing numbers of restaurants serve SEA cuisine largely merged around the train stations of major cities and the neighborhood of immigrant communities. The culinary spectrum in Taiwan has never been more colorful and diverse than ever. The special exhibition of “A Taste of Hometown: Southeast Asia Flavors ” not only shows the perspectives of flavor realm and culinary territory come across Taiwan society but also displays how the diversity and complexity of SEA region food plants. As well as how they reshape the appearances and changes of the diverse culture of Taiwan, and thus, represent a new integration of the balance between the natural environment and cultural inclusion in present Taiwan. The growing appreciation of the close relationship between cultural diversity and biodiversity reflected in migration and their arrival cities’ extensive knowledge concerning the management of mutual cultural understanding and biodiversity. This paper aims at strengthening intercultural conservation in society via food plants, cuisines as well as migration’s collective knowledge, perceptions, and practices contain in the concept of biocultural diversity.

Key words: Immigration and Museum, cultural exchanging, migration, diversity, food culture and exhibition

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(Im)migrations and Taiwan society

An easy way to start the intercultural conversation and collaboration is through the cuisine and dishes from different cultures. The curiosity and the eager to understand the different cultures is aroused during the events and festivals related to the cuisine and food plants introductions. Although Taiwan and Southeast Asian (SEA) regions are very close to each other, Taiwanese people barely understand the culture, history, and languages of them. Instead, Taiwanese society has stereotypes and even prejudices toward the immigrants as an ethnic which their culture is inferior to Taiwanese culture, even the academic fields have devoted to the researches regarding SEA regions in various aspects. However, when we take a look at the map, Southeast Asia is broad and diverse Topography covers a wide range, measuring around 5,000 km both from north to south and east to west. Its topography includes various islands, rivers and lakes, plains, hills, valleys, high mountains. It is situated on the equatorial rainforest and monsoon climate zones, featuring abundant ecology and biodiversity.

The interwoven cultural interaction in the SEA region has gradually formed a dense network. Vietnamese mostly believe in Mahayana Buddhism. Thailand and Cambodia follow Theravada Buddhism. Indonesians mainly believe in Islamism. In the Philippines, more people believe in Catholicism and Christianity. But take a more in-depth look, it is evident that a cultural context has retained without being entirely influenced by a foreign culture, resulting from a series of choices, digestion, and reform. Similarly, the newly introduced ingredients integrate with the original cuisines, which together evolve into different food culture. The Indigenous people in Nusantara areas and the later came Europeans initiated the spice trade in the maritime era, undoubtedly a catalyst for geographical exploration. The Southeast Asian culinary realm brought into Taiwan by the immigrants in 1980s due to marriages or labor contracts and sometimes both. In the early days, these immigrant spouses in Taiwanese families were not allowed to cook their hometown flavors or were even forced to eat or cook the cuisines that they never come across in their lives. They were also forbidden to make contact with the original family and speak native languages to their children. Some immigrants are Muslims, pork and alcohol are prohibited due to Islamic principles, on the contrast here in Taiwan, pork and alcohol (for cooking) take a significant part in traditional culinary; therefore, they would have a challenging time to fit in the local society. Taiwan society was unfamiliar with SEA culture and culinary, and even rejected and resisted them (mostly inside the family with immigrant spouses) when it first encountered them in the 1980s. After over ten years of increasing Southeast Asian restaurants and shops, and the Southeast Asian food trend boomed in recent years, Taiwan society starts to accept, promote, and develop the knowledge toward the “exotic” cuisines. Related exhibitions and books are also and published. In the past decade, the social and cultural exclusions of SEA immigrants have greatly reduced. The support and encouragement from the family members, friends from native countries, NGOs, and the migration communities enhance the immigrants to express their native cultures with confident. As prestigious educational institutions, often visited by schoolchildren, museums have the potential to affect everyone’s way of seeing the world. By making museums places for exploring and learning about the past and the present reality of issues such as migration, transnational connections, freedom of movement, and human rights, they not only become more relevant as cultural institutions, but also facilitate positive changes in how people relate to one another, thereby ultimately contributing to society’s sustainable development (Christina Johansson & Pieter Bevelander, 2017). National Taiwan Museum (NTM), the oldest museum in Taiwan and with the responsibilities of preserving and representing the natural history and human memories, has reacted to the migration situation and trends and to recreate the intercultural dialogue and enhance mutual understanding of diverse ethnic groups with different cultural backgrounds.

Different history timeline of exotic species of food plants and herbs introduced into Taiwan

Taiwan is an island state, surrounded by oceans, with the already known history since six hundreds of years ago, was continuously visited by different people in different timelines. Taiwan is abundant in various cuisines brought in by immigrants. Firstly, we could trace back to the Austronesians, who considered as the first and indigenous people in Taiwan, acquired food ingredients from the mountains and the seas and make genuine delicacies of the land in the simplest way. Even so, due to Austronesian's sailing skills, they also brought some plants with them when they arrived in Taiwan and settled. Then, over more than 500 years ago, the cuisines of Hokkien and Hakka (residents from the coastal area of Southeast China) arrived Taiwan. The Europeans introduced crops like cauliflower, tomato, corns, and grapes to Taiwan and Southeast Asian regions right started with maritime trading. Europeans brought the fruits and plants grew only in South America into Southeast Asia. The British Empire and Dutch East India Company fought for the natural resources in Nusantara (Archipelagos SEA) and Indo China (Peninsula SEA) areas. The economic, industrial, and food ingredient plants widely introduced and planted in SEA. Some species were brought into Taiwan from SEA in the 1800s. Japanese came after European and introduced tropical plants to construct, or tried to recreate, an imaginary Southeast Asian scene in Taiwan for developmental and research purposes.

After 1945, due to the China civil war, the defeated KMT party, the military, and refugees fled to Taiwan, they have settled on this land successively, which have continuously revived with new values and created unique delicacies that are both traditional and innovative. The history timeline of exotic food plants were brought into Taiwan can be described approximately in the following list (Wang, 2018):

- (1) Before 1624, the Austronesian Indigenous tribes;
- (2) Approximately around 1645-1884, the Dutch and Spain period;
- (3) 1662-1895, From Ming to Ching dynasty of China ruled period;
- (4) 1895-1945, Japanese ruling period;
- (5) 1945-1949, after World War II and China Civil War ;
- (5) 1980's -now, Globalization and Migration Trend from Southeast Asian Region.

This exhibition would focus on the latest trend of migration into Taiwan, the foreign spouses and contract workers from SEA region, mostly, the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Thailand.

The purposes, stories, and achievement of the exhibition: People moving with hometown culinary

In this exhibition we showcased "Southeast Asia Climate and Its Geography of Production", "Southeast Asian Flavors: Features of Southeast Asian Cuisine", "Recreating the Taste of Hometown" and "A Future Connection with Southeast Asia". The structure of this exhibition can be displayed in the following chart:

Major Chapters	Themes	Sub-themes
1. Southeast Asia Climate and Its Geography of Production	1-1 Countless Ties	1-1-1 A Distance of Innumerable Bridges
		1-1-2 Southeast Asia: My Hometwon
	1-2 Features of Southeast Asia Climate	1-2-1 Southeast Asia Archipelago and Southeast Asia Peninsula
		1-2-2 The Diverse Topography

Major Chapters	Themes	Sub-themes
	1-3 Natural Diversity in Southeast Asia	1-2-3 Two Major Climate Zones: Equatorial Rainforest and Monsoon Climate in SEA
		1-3-1 Usages of Island Features: Hunter-Gatherers in the Rainforest, Overseas Exploration and Ocean Trading, and Colonial Cultivation
		1-3-2 River Plains and Delta: The Land of Fish and Rice
	1-4 Southeast Asia-The Cross Roads of the World	1-3-3 Hills and Heights: Swidden Farming (Slash-and-Burn), Terracing, and Gathering
		1-4-1 A Land of Cultural Diversity
		1-4-2 A Dining Table of the World
2. Southeast Asian Flavors: Features of Southeast Asian Cuisine	2-1 Abundant Products of the Tropics	
	2-2 Culinary Tones of Southeast Asian Food	2-2-1 Flavoring Herbs and Fresh Vegetables
		2-2-2 A Great Mixture of Spices
		2-2-3 Sauces for Preserving and Seasoning
		2-2-4 Other Pickled and Preserved Foods
3. Recreating the Taste of Hometown	3-1 Hometown Memories	3-1-1 Wonderful Tastes from Childhood Memories
		3-1-2 Special Festival Dishes
	3-2 Recreating Mom's Taste	3-2-1 From Balcony, Vegetable Garden, to Farm
		3-2-2 From Grocery Store to Import Trading
	3-3 A-Xiang's Food Shop: Cooking for Sharing	
	3-4 Hometown dishes at the Dining Table (Showcasing three traditional cuisines for each country.)	3-4-1 A Vietnamese Dining Table Vietnamese Spring Roll, Turmeric Pancake, Vietnamese Sour Fish Soup
		3-4-2 An Indonesian Dining Table Yellow Colored (Turmeric) Rice, Indonesian Mixed Salad (Gado Gado ²), Green Colored (pandan ³ leaves) Balls (Klepon)
		3-4-3 A Thai Dining Table Thai Stir-fried Minced Pork, Thai Sour and Spicy Soup, Green Papaya Salad

² “Gado Gado” is the Indonesian name of this cuisine. It use peanut butter sauce mixed with spices to pour over a bowl of fresh and slightly boiled vegetables and hard-boiled eggs.

³ Pandan leaves (*Pandanus amaryllifolius*) are widely planted in SEA and Taiwan. However, Pandan leaves in Taiwan were used to only used as tea leaves. (Im)migrations from SEA, show us the various usages of the pandan leaves, especially as the natural and edible dye ingredient.

Major Chapters	Themes	Sub-themes
		3-4-4 A Filipino Dining Table Tamarind Vegetable Soup, Tripe and Mixed Vegetables, Filipino Rice Noodle
		3-4-5 A Cambodian Dining Table Cambodian Steamed Corn Dessert, Cambodian Rice Noodle and Lemongrass Fish Soup, Cambodian Amok ⁴
		3-4-6 A Myanmar Dining Table Tea Leaf Salad, Fish Broth with Rice Noodle
		3-4-7 A Malaysian Dining Table Malaysian Set Meal with Coconut Rice, Malaysian Sambal and Fried Chicken, Kelantan Herb Rice Salad
4. A Future Connection with Southeast Asia		

There are four major culinary features Southeast Asian cuisines, they are (1) flavoring herbs and fresh vegetables, (2) a great mixture of spices, (3) sauces for preserving and the mix of plants and meat, and (4) seasoning and other pickled and preserved foods. Those culinary features of SEA region are very different from local Taiwanese cuisines. Immigrants bring with them their culinary culture but change their cuisine and identity due to the lack of individual ingredients. They learn new culture during migrations, which gradually reformed their cultural identity. We were ambitious to exhibit all the stories accompany the intercultural dialogues among migrations and local society, food plant usages, and various usage among food plants. The migration communities devoted, assisted, and closely collaborated with us during the curating process.

The preparation of this exhibition firstly took two years of interviewing and group interviewing with immigrants from Southeast Asian countries. At the beginning of the interview, I started with Indonesian immigrants in Taiwan, then extended to Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar. Before conduct the interviews, I collected ten basic and common spices, herbs, and food plants, contain a large amount of information on the internet of each country, to use as necessary interview materials. During the process of the interview, the gathered information includes not only the food plants and cuisines but also the cultural background, hometown memories, even mythologies and local folklore of some food plants.

Displaying Southeast Asian dishes not only evokes the sensitive taste buds but may also lead to more understanding of the cook's feelings and emotions if provided with a few stories and the original history behind a cuisine. With all the help we got, in this exhibition, we could find out what SEA region immigrations have brought into Taiwan to ease their constant homesickness. In the exhibition, we showcased the similarities of Cambodian, Thailand, and Vietnam, sharing some similar food plants and seasoning and preserved seafood sauces usage. When the immigrants are from those nations, they found it very difficult to eat mostly meats and rice instead of flavoring herbs and fresh vegetables dipping

⁴ Amok means curry in Khmar language. Cambodian curry with very sour taste but blends perfectly with coconut milk flavor.

with seasoning seafood sauces like the hometown cuisine style. Some food plants and species cannot even be found in Taiwan. When we were presenting the uniqueness cooking features of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Myanmar, a great mixture of spices is one of the essential elements of local cuisines. Every different Masala (spice mixture) has its recipe. It differs according to the person who cooks. Through the exhibition, the immigrants were not only telling their own stories but also providing interpretation among different cultures. The Hometown Flavor exhibitions had acquired good comments, such as encouraging more immigrants to stand out and tell their histories, improving the mutual understanding of diverse ethnical groups, and requiring the exhibition to tour around Taiwan. We did, and we started in 2017 in Taipei, then 2018 in Taichung(the central part of Taiwan), and just finished touring exhibition in Tainan(the southern part) on June 2nd, 2019. The audiences were immigrants, migrant workers, school teachers and students, tourists from SEA regions, and Taiwanese people. Due to the limitation of the exhibition hall, we couldn't display various cuisines from SEA region, a resolution to this is to design a painting area and invite the visitors to draw a hometown flavor.

Conclusion

In the ever-changing history, the development of cuisine has always been connected with natural and cultural environments. Immigrations, by way of food, bring their individual hometown flavor into Taiwan. They lead the people of Taiwan into further understanding of Southeast Asia through cuisines and make everyone see this important force that supports the basic industries of Taiwan. Museums should be the roles of revoking and constructing the memories for the following generations and migrations to review the history of a period of time regarding the integration and fusion of various ethnical groups in the modern age since starting of globalization.

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